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IN NATO

Scenario of Spies and 'Suicide'

by PHILIPPE de VOSJOLI

The author, a former French intelligence agent who wrote the story of the defection of a key Soviet agent known as "Martel" (LIFE, April 26), now writes his explanation of the NATO spy scandal.

As casually as any camera buff just back from vacation, the West German admiral dropped off his film at a Bonn photo shop. The roll *did* contain snapshots, the official story goes, but sandwiched in between was evidence that something was shockingly rotten in West Europe's front line of defense—nine frames showing NATO documents stamped "top secret." The photographer was Rear Admiral Hermann Lüdke *(below right)* who, as NATO's deputy chief of logistics, knew virtually every secret plan for countering a Soviet invasion. Two weeks later Lüdke was found shot to death, and suddenly the West German government was engulfed by a mysterious *Selbstmordwelle*—a wave of suicides. That same day the No. 2 man in the West German Federal Intelligence Service was discovered with a bullet in his head; within two weeks four more government officials succumbed variously to gunshot, hanging, drowning and drugs. Bonn insisted all six were suicides, but its conflicting explanations clearly indicated that West Germany's security apparatus was coming apart. And with it NATO's: in a perfect position to supplement Lüdke's work was a Communist agent planted in the top NATO command, a hard-drinking Turk named Nahit Imre *(p. 30)*. As a result NATO has had to rescramble its codes, revise its order of battle against Soviet attacks and redeploy nuclear weapons. But the bizarre pattern of "suicide" suggests that there is even more to the intrigue, that the Soviets have been hurt too. In the article at right a former chief of French intelligence in the U.S. tells why.

Almost all intelligence agents, like policemen and generals, die in bed. The profession is not nearly so frighten-ing as many people suspect. When an agent is uncovered, it is embarrassing and inconvenient. After a few years in jail the fellow must find another line of work. But rarely is one shot. This is why the affair in West Germany with its epidemic of murder and/or suicide has such awesome overtones.

In all my 20 years with French intelligence in North Africa, Indochina and Washington, I have never seen anything like it. The steady accumulation of corpses, the clumsy ways in which murder was made to look like suicide or accidental death, the dramatics connected with each killing—all these things are contrary to the rules of the game.

Ordinarily, when it becomes necessary to eliminate an agent, the matter is handled neatly and inconspicuously. Bodies disappear without a trace, or become involved in accidents which are perfectly planned and arouse no suspicion. And nobody, as a rule, is more adept at this lethal business, or considers it more a part of successful espionage, than the Russians. In Moscow, at the headquarters of K.G.B.—the chief Soviet foreign espionage organization—there is a special division called "Spetsburo" whose sole job is to arrange for the execution of agents. The West German suicide epidemic seemed to involve acts of desperation, done in haste without the usual Spetsburo efficiency.

This could mean only one thing: some very important members of K.G.B. had defected to the West and were busily spilling the beans. It is now known that at least one of them was a Czechoslovak employed by K.G.B. who had become He is currently somewhere in the U.S.—singing away. His disclosures, as well as those by other defectors, were blowing the cover of Soviet agents in West Germany and other NATO countries.

Soon after, a team of top intelligence agents from Washington left for London to join their British counterparts. Together they went to Bonn to seek cooperation from General Armin Eck, the chief of West German counterintelligence. Using the information provided by the defectors, investigations were begun into the activities of a number of highly placed Germans, including six nuclear scientists. The scientists were more fortunate than some of the

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other suspects—a leak alerted them that they were being watched. Within hours they were on their way to East Germany, some by plane and others by car. The Soviet apparatus can be very efficient when it wants to keep someone alive.

At about this time, M.A.D.—the West German counterintelligence organization responsible for security within the German army—was acting on a tip passed along by another defector. The suspect in this case was Admiral Hermann Lüdke, who as deputy chief of logistics at NATO knew the location of all nuclear weapons in NATO countries. He was believed to be passing this vital information to the Russians, although except for the tip there was no proof.

On Sept. 27, Lüdke was interrogated by M.A.D. agents who confronted him with "evidence"—a roll of film they claimed he had sent out to be processed commercially which contained photographs of NATO "Top Secret" documents. I suspect that the whole photography business was a M.A.D. fabrication; Lüdke could hardly have been so unprofessional as to have mixed his personal and "business" photography on one roll of film and turned it into a Bonn shop for developing. In any case, the agents tried to trick Lüdke into confessing that he indeed had been turning over NATO secrets to the Russians, but the admiral was too smart for this. All he did was consent to having his apartment searched the next day. When copies of secret NATO documents were found there, he had a glib but apparently acceptable explanation. He was not arrested.

But counterintelligence was closing in on him. One week later, M.A.D. officials met with their counterparts in B.N.D., the West German equivalent of the CIA, and said they now had enough evidence on Lüdke and had decided to arrest him.

That decision triggered the mysterious parade of deaths. General Horst Wendland, second in command at B.N.D., attended the meeting, then returned to his office in the same building. His secretary found him dead on the floor, less than an hour later, a bullet hole in his head.

It was called a suicide by the German government. But Wendland had not left a suicide note nor indicated to anyone that he wanted to take his life. And he was known to everybody as a gay extrovert who loved sports and life.

Admiral Lüdke died the same day—three hours later. His body was found in the front seat of an automobile in the Eifel Mountains where he had gone on a hunting trip. He had a hole through the upper torso made by a bullet from his own rifle. The police report listed his death a suicide, but the gamekeeper who found Lüdke's body said he had been shot in the back.

When an intelligence agent is caught, he instantly becomes a liability to his employer. His captors, on the other hand, go to great lengths to protect him. The agent is pumped and pumped for information—and generally most of them talk. It just happens that way.

In 1962, for instance, when I was stationed in Washington, disclosures by a defector fingered two men high up in West Germany's intelligence system—Heinz Felfe and Hans Clemens. They were arrested as Soviet agents and placed immediately beyond harm's way. The information they gave helped break an important Russian network.

This time, K.G.B. has determined to protect its top man in West Germany—and the deaths didn't stop with Lüdke and Wendland. Within a week there were four more "suicides," although I do not believe any of them were. Dr. Hans-Heinrich Schenk, 40, an official in the Economics Ministry, died by hanging in his mother's apartment in Cologne. This is a handy way for eliminating marked agents, like having them "jump" out of windows. There was no suicide note.

Miss Edeltraud Grapentin, 52, of the Information Ministry died one day later from an overdose of sleeping pills. A spokesman for the government says her case was simply a "personal tragedy." But there have been reports that she was the contact for the six scientists who were working for Moscow and fled the country.

Lt. Colonel Johannes Grimm, 54, a high official in the Ministry of Defense, was shot to death in his office. The official version was suicide. Col. Grimm had cancer, the police said. But three days later it was learned that doctors had recently examined the colonel and declared him in perfect health.

Gerhard Böhm, also in the Defense Ministry, disappeared about the same time. His body was fished out of the Rhine 11 days later. The authorities called it suicide, saying that Böhm was disappointed at being passed over for a promotion. He was 61 years old.

All these deaths in such a short time cannot be simply coincidence. By calling them suicides, embarrassed German authorities were trying to cover their own mistakes. The fact is that K.G.B. had penetrated the entire German intelligence and security organization.

The affair in West Germany is far from over, and the K.G.B. is in difficulty. Until the Russians are able to estab- lish a damage report, they don't know who is under suspicion and who is not. In the meantime, most of their agents have taken cover. In France, we call it *mettre en sommeil*, which literally translated means "put to sleep." They will have to stay that way until the crisis is over.

Meanwhile, somewhere in the vicinity of London and Washington, the debriefing of the defectors goes on. I mention these cities because no defector would want to go anywhere else. Washington is naturally preferred because it is farther from Russia and offers more opportunities and protection.

The identity of the defectors is probably known to only a score of people, including the very highest men in the U.S. government.

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Keeping them "safe" is absolutely essential. Their guards are changed every few days without being told who they are protecting. Bit by bit, pieces of information are extracted and put together. The interrogators are very patient and very kind. They are aware that threats and coercion won't work. It's that kind of business. The worst thing they can say to a defector is, "Here is $1,000 and you're free to go. There is the door."

Espionage systems have built-in safeguards against defectors. Because of this, no one is allowed to know the identity of more than a few fellow agents. Thus, a defector's real value lies in his ability to talk about specific information that has been sent to Moscow. The information must then be traced, by the process of elimination, back to its source. This is a long and tedious process, sometimes taking years.

But already there are signs that the interrogations are uncovering K.G.B. agents in other countries besides West Germany. In Italy four men were arrested for passing NATO secrets to the Russians. In England two members of the Soviet embassy were expelled from the country for recruiting British servicemen as agents and transmitting information they supplied to Moscow.

Perhaps most significant of all was the uncovering of Nahit Imre, a Turk who was comptroller of NATO's finances at headquarters in Brussels and, apparently, a hard-working agent *(next page)*. Now under interrogation in Ankara, he is giving more and more detail on his activities and his Soviet contacts. He might even lead Western intelligence experts to Mr. Big in Germany—despite the K.G.B.'s extraordinary and unprecedented efforts to keep his identity secret. ◀

by MIGUEL ACOCA

BRUSSELS

The arrest of Nahit Imre for spying on NATO while serving as one of its top officials was almost embarrassingly easy. No Beretta was brought into play, nor any final desperate lunge for the poison pill. In fact, Imre, a dapper and graying 55-year-old Turk who was NATO's financial comptroller, had spent most of the day drinking Scotch in his office. [illegible] September, after sharing a ride home with another Turkish employe of NATO, he got out of the car at a newsstand near his modern apartment building. While Imre fished for change to buy a paper, he set his attaché case on the sidewalk. At that moment a man picked it up and dashed down the street. Imre, with a pint of whisky in his stomach, gave chase and caught the thief just as he was jumping into a car. Suddenly Belgian police and NATO security men appeared.

The attaché case contained 20 rolls of unprocessed film. Developed, the negatives showed that Imre had photographed no less than 1,440 top secret documents. By this time Imre, who had been muttering about killing himself and had refused to speak in French, began to talk in Turkish. Ten days later, when he finished, he was quietly put aboard a plane for Istanbul and now faces more interrogation, trial for espionage and a reduced sentence of 25 years, provided he keeps on talking.

Imre has already admitted that he was a spy for 10 years. NATO officials say he was first recruited as an agent in 1958 by a Yugoslav in Paris, where he held another NATO job. Passing his contact a classified document, he was paid $300 and signed a receipt, thereby hooking himself for good. Since then he has held a succession of important jobs: in Turkey, in the Turkish embassy in Rome, and finally at NATO in Brussels. He displayed an astonishing capacity for recall—an ability buttressed by his skill in taking rapid notes in Arabic script.

As one of NATO's top civilian officers, Imre had access to virtually every secret document except those pertaining to the deployment of nuclear weapons. The documents he handled dealt with the infrastructure projects—the building of pipelines, warehouses, weapons factories and stockpiles. He knew the reaction capability of NATO forces in emergencies, and he showed a knack for gaining access to other secret papers not ordinarily under his purview. "Imre attended all sorts of secret meetings," says one official. "He had to be given real papers. To a man with his financial training, figures told the whole story."

When Imre took the comptroller's job last December, he was given explicit instructions by a go-between—probably one of 15 such contacts known to be plying their trade in Brussels. He was told to lie low and wait for the right moment. Despite this, Imre managed to attract a lot of attention. He became prominently involved in a bureaucratic struggle with a Dutch NATO official and tried to recruit allies by inviting them to epicurean lunches where he picked up the tab. "He suffered from *la folie des grandeurs*," says a former drinking pal.

Imre's home life also piqued his colleagues' interest. He had a large and elegant penthouse that occupied the entire seventh floor of his apartment building. His Hungarian-born wife drove an expensive car, went to the hairdresser every two days and sent their two sons to private schools. Imre himself had a passion for sauna baths, and kept a list of 11 such places in Brussels. Once he was seen dancing nude in his kitchen in front of the refrigerator.

It was in June, apparently, that Imre got the word from his "handling agent." He bought a camera, put it in his filing cabinet and locked it up with four rolls of film. It was almost immediately discovered—and left there—by NATO security agents who had watched him since March and who now hoped that Imre would lead them to his contacts.

Next month Imre took his wife and children on vacation. On Aug. 1 he flew back alone, and, during the plane's stopover in Frankfurt bought 30 more rolls of film. In Brussels he tried out the film and discovered that it was the wrong type. So he went to a photo shop, made a swap for the right kind and bought an additional 20 rolls. Then he set to work at a frantic pace. Arriving in his fifth-floor office at 7:30 a.m. daily, he locked the door, drew the shades, turned on the desk lamp and took out his camera. Placing the document on the floor, he braced himself against the desk and pressed the shutter. The miniature camera took 72 pictures per roll. After a few snaps, he would reach into a desk drawer, pull out a bottle of Vat 69 and pour himself a drink.

[illegible] drink, NATO security agents watched it all via closed-circuit TV, their cam-

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They were astonished by both his speed and carelessness. In the final weeks he must have felt that time was running out.

Imre was primarily interested in papers pertaining to Czechoslovakia. When they were denied him, he outflanked security by going to his unsuspecting countrymen in the Turkish delegation. He complained that he needed the files and just couldn't obtain them fast enough through channels.

A few days later Imre flew off to Paris with his former secretary and mistress from the Turkish embassy in Rome. NATO security believes he intended to see his handling agent there. Then he flew home to Turkey to see his ill father —and perhaps his handling agent. Two days later, Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia.

Imre returned to Brussels with his wife and children and resumed his photography. He returned the old files to the Turkish delegation and obtained the most recent data on Czechoslovakia.

On Sept. 11 Imre announced he was making another trip to Paris. NATO officials, convinced that this time Imre wasn't coming back, decided to close the trap. They deployed their security agents, then, via their closed-circuit TV, tuned in on the fleeing Turk as he packed his attaché case with the last of the exposed film and downed his last glass of Scotch.

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